

## **THE MINISTRY OF LAY PREACHER: A WESLEYAN HERITAGE<sup>1</sup>**

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The ministry of lay preacher is important to the Uniting Church, as it was to its previous traditions, especially the Methodist tradition. I am aware that, in many ways, the role played by lay preachers in the colonial years is being replicated in our time. Especially in rural areas, patterns of ministry that were common in the nineteenth century are being repeated. Lay ministries, including that of lay preacher, are again the primary source of the Church's ministry locally, while ordained ministry is available less often and has a focus mainly on the administration of the sacraments and assisting to equip and support the laity.

I acknowledge that lay ministry was common to all of the uniting churches before union. However, I consider it correct to argue that the role of Lay Preacher in the Uniting Church is largely (although not exclusively) a Methodist heritage. The various branches of Methodism that were established in the Australia colonies during the nineteenth century each depended heavily on their 'local preachers' to pioneer and maintain their many and varied preaching places.

I have titled this paper *'The Ministry of Lay Preacher: A Wesleyan Heritage'* partly because the Wesleyan Methodist Church was the main branch of Methodism immediately following Wesley's death in 1791. However, I more particularly want to acknowledge the significance of John Wesley, and his mother, in the development of this important lay ministry. In this sense the term 'Wesleyan' has a double meaning. It refers both to the Wesleyan Methodist tradition

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<sup>1</sup> This paper contains the essence of an occasional address prepared for the Conference of the Lay Preacher's Association of the Uniting Church in Australia (Victoria and Tasmania) in March 2003 – in honour of the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Rev John Wesley AM, (17 June 1703 – old time).

and to two members of the Wesley family – John Wesley and his mother, Susanna Wesley.

It needs to be made clear, however, that I am in no way arguing that lay ministry, or the ministry of lay preacher, is uniquely a Wesleyan heritage. It is not. Indeed, an overview of church history, commencing with the Acts of the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost, will clearly show that lay ministry and lay preaching have a long history. What I do argue, however, is that the form of the ministry we know as 'lay preacher' in the Uniting Church is more directly linked with the Wesleyan heritage.

### Methodist Local Preachers

This ministry of lay preacher is traced back to the earliest days of Methodism, and its origins are worth recalling. In 1739, not long after John Wesley commenced his field preaching near Bristol, a young man by the name of Thomas Maxfield was converted to Christ and became a committed Methodist. Wesley soon engaged him as a lay assistant and sent him to London. Part of his work was to support new Methodists and the new 'Society' that had been established. His role was to pray with them and assist them to understand the Bible and the disciplines of Methodism. However, Thomas Maxfield sensed a compulsion to preach, and this he did at 'The Foundery' while Wesley was away. On hearing news of this, Wesley returned to London immediately to confront his young assistant.

First, however, he discussed the matter with his mother, Susanna, who to John's great surprise, admitted she had heard Thomas Maxfield preach and considered he was as much called of God for this ministry as her own clerical husband and sons had been. This surprised Wesley even more, but because of his high regard for his mother and her sound theological reflection and wisdom, he chose to listen to Maxwell preach. He soon became convinced his mother was correct in her discernment and resolved to include lay preachers as part of his expanding ministry. Careful, as usual, John prepared a stringent set of rules to govern this new lay ministry. As with much of Wesley's work, this new step had a pragmatic purpose – that many more people would hear the gospel. However, Wesley was able to justify his actions theologically. This he later did in a sermon on 'The Ministerial Office'. The following extract from this sermon is useful to introduce the office of a lay preacher:

Not long after, a young man, Thomas Maxfield, offered himself to serve them as a son in the gospel. And then another, Thomas Richards, and a little after a third, Thomas Westell. Let it be well observed on what terms we received these, viz., as Prophets, not as Priests. We received them wholly and solely to preach, not to administer sacraments. And those who imagine these offices to be inseparably joined are totally ignorant of the constitution of the whole Jewish as well as Christian Church. Neither the Romish, nor the English, nor the Presbyterian Churches ever accounted them so. Otherwise we should never have accepted the service, either of Mr. Maxfield, Richards, or Westell.<sup>2</sup>

Lay Preachers became a significant part of the Methodist movement and they soon outnumbered Wesley's itinerant preachers, most of whom were ordained clergy of the Church of England who had become supporters of Mr Wesley. Most Lay Preachers worked within their own locality, although a few were engaged in itinerant work. Most were men, although Wesley did admit a few women preachers so long as they had an 'extra-ordinary call' from God. By the time of Wesley's death in 1791 it is estimated there were around 2,000 local preachers, compared with around 300 itinerant preachers.

I mentioned Susanna Wesley briefly above. It is worth spending just a little longer giving an account of this important woman. If our tradition practiced canonizing saints, Susanna Wesley would be one of the most worthy candidates. She has long been known affectionately as the 'Mother of Methodism'. But there is much more to this than mere affection. She was far more influential than some have recognized. I mention just a few facets of her story.

Susanna was born in 1669, the second youngest child of a large family. Her father was the scholarly and devout Dr Samuel Annesley. Her mother was Dr Annesley's second wife. In 1662 Samuel Annesley was one of around 2,000 priests of the Church of England who had been ejected from their parishes because of controversy about the imposition of the Book of Common Prayer. Samuel Annesley went on to become a significant leader in the 'Dissenting' movement.

<sup>2</sup> Sermon 115, 'The Ministerial Office' (paragraph 10), in Wesley's *Works* (Jackson edition), Volume 7, pp. 4-5.

Susanna's early childhood was exposed to much of the theological debate that took place in these years of upheaval, much of it in the family home at Spital Yard, Bishopgate, in London. Samuel and his wife were progressive in many ways and made sure that all their children had a lively and disciplined education. In this regard Susanna had considerable advantage on many young women of her time. She was also a person of independent spirit and thought. By the time she was thirteen she had decided for herself to return to the Anglican Church. In time, she met Samuel Wesley, probably in her family home, at a Dissenter's meeting. He too chose to return to the Anglican fold and the two were married in 1688.

A decade or so later, in 1697, Samuel Wesley was installed as Rector at Epworth. Susanna gave birth to nineteen children, only ten of whom lived to adulthood. In spite of poor circumstances, she provided for each, including the girls, a sound classical education. She conducted her own school in the Rectory. Following his escape from a fire that burnt down the Rectory when he was five, young 'Jackie' seems to have received her particular attention.

Life for the Wesleys was not easy. They were poor, and at least once Samuel was imprisoned for failing to repay his debts. Samuel and Susanna did not always see eye to eye. Sometimes they differed on matters of religion and politics. On one occasion Samuel observed that Susanna did not say 'Amen' at their daily prayers, when he prayed for the new king, William. This resulted in a serious squabble and soon after Samuel left for London, leaving a curate in church of his parish. It appears the curate was not a good preacher and the parishioners stayed away from church. Meanwhile, Susanna had already begun providing for the spiritual needs of her household – her children and servants. She offered prayers and instruction. In time some of the local parishioners asked if they could attend, and this she allowed. Before long there were up to two hundred people gathering weekly in and around the Rectory. The curate was furious and sent a message to Samuel in London. Samuel wrote immediately demanding that she cease the meetings forthwith. Susanna was not to be discouraged and wrote in return, 'If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience, but send me your positive command, in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment, for neglecting this opportunity of doing good, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of

our Lord Jesus Christ.'<sup>3</sup> Samuel dropped the matter, and Susanna continued leading her devotions until her husband returned to his parish.

Susanna was a wise woman, and she was also theologically well-informed. Her adult sons sought advice and theological insight from both their parents. Some of their correspondence has survived. It appears Susanna had a more lasting influence, and this cannot merely be attributed to her outliving her husband by some years. We have already noted that Susanna, who for some time lived in John's house in London, played an important role during the earliest days of the Methodist revival. She was influential in ensuring that her rather strict son, John, did not dismiss the preaching ministry of Thomas Maxwell simply because he was not ordained. We might even say that the origins of the ministry of Methodist Local Preachers owes much to her influence. John Wesley, however, was quick to realize that in extraordinary times God was inclined to lead the church into extraordinary forms of ministry.

A word needs to be said about the role of women in the life of early Methodism. This is not the context in which to deal with this subject in great detail. However, there can be no doubt that Susanna Wesley's influence on her sons was clearly reflected in the variety of roles provided for women in early Methodism, much of which was quite uncommon and even extraordinary for the period. It is instructive to note that the emergence of the role of women in Methodism, including their role as 'preachers' emerged as part of the extraordinary nature of Methodism itself.

Paul Wesley Chilcote's *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism*<sup>4</sup> is useful in understanding the nature of Methodism and the Wesleyan Revival. In particular it deals with the emergence of women preachers; but it does so in the context of the overall emergence of lay ministry, including that of lay preaching. It is of considerable value in understanding the Methodist movement, the evolution of the ministry of lay preacher, including the role of women in this and other ministries. Chilcote explains how

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Mary Greetham, *Susanna Wesley: Mother of Methodism*, (Peterborough: The Foundry Press 1994), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Wesley Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism*, Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1991.

Methodism, under the leadership of John Wesley, was seen as an extraordinary movement. It is instructive to cite Wesley's own views on this. The first reference is from a letter from John to his brother Charles on 23 June 1739:

DEAR BROTHER,

MY answer to them which trouble me is this: God commands me to do good unto all men; to instruct the ignorant, reform the wicked, confirm the virtuous. Man commands me not to do this in another's parish; that is, in effect, not to do it at all. If it be just to obey man rather than God, judge ye.

'But,' say they, 'it is just that you submit yourself to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake.' True; to every ordinance of man which is not contrary to the command of God. But if any man, Bishop or other, ordain that I shall not do what God commands me to do, to submit to that ordinance would be to obey man rather than God.

And to do this, I have both an ordinary call and an extraordinary. My ordinary call is, my ordination by the Bishop: 'Take thou authority to preach the word of God.' My extraordinary call is witnessed by the works God doeth by my ministry; which prove that He is with me of a truth in this exercise of my office.

Perhaps this might be better expressed in another way: God bears witness in an extraordinary manner, that my thus exercising my ordinary call is well-pleasing in his sight.

But what if a Bishop forbids this? I do not say as St. Cyprian, *Populus a scelerato Antistite separare se debet*. But I say, God being my helper, I will obey him still: And if I suffer for it, his will be done. Adieu! <sup>5</sup>

Chilcote gives a useful account of the 'extraordinary' steps that Wesley took in response to this special calling he had. His own 'field preaching' was perhaps the first and most challenging step outside what he considered to be 'ordinary'; and this was something he referred to as 'vile.'

As we have already noted, under the influence of his mother, and in response to what he saw as the leading of the Spirit, Wesley allowed Thomas Maxfield, and then others, to engage in lay preaching. It was

<sup>5</sup> Wesley's *Works* (Jackson edition), Volume 12, p. 99.

not long before the first signs were beginning to show of this ministry being extended to women. However, here there was a reluctance, and consequently a longer period of evolution. It is useful to note, as Chilcote points out, that the role of women as preachers was a natural outworking of the leading role that women played in Methodism, especially in its earlier years. Early women leaders, like Grace Murray, emerged as leaders in band and class meetings and soon became leaders in other gatherings, offering prayer, giving testimony, reading Mr Wesley's sermons and notes, and offering 'exhortation'. Grace Murray's gifts were such that Wesley engaged her services in itinerant work.

A major issue had to do with the difference between 'exhortation' and 'preaching'. For Wesley the difference was important, especially in the earlier years of the revival. He saw 'exhortation' as giving encouragement to others in the faith, and this could include reference to Bible passages. 'Preaching', on the other hand, he saw as taking a Biblical text and expounding it. Over time Wesley's natural prejudice against women preaching, and his anxiety to retain the distinction between exhortation and preaching, dissipated. This was in no small part on account of his growing awareness of the value of the work done by such leading women as Mrs Sarah (Sally) Crosby and Mrs Mary Bosanquet. Again it is instructive to cite Wesley's own words in two letters to Sarah Crosby. The first letter, written from London and dated 14 February 1761, concerned whether or not Mrs Crosby had gone too far in her public exhortation.

MY DEAR SISTER,

Miss — gave me yours on Wednesday night. Hitherto, I think you have not gone too far. You could not well do less. I apprehend all you can do more is, when you meet again, to tell them simply, 'You lay me under a great difficulty. The Methodists do not allow of women Preachers: Neither do I take upon me any such character. But I will just nakedly tell you what is in my heart.' This will, in a great measure, obviate the grand objection, and prepare for J. Hampson's coming. I do not see that you have broken any law. Go on calmly and steadily. If you have time, you may read to them the Notes on any chapter before you speak a few words; or one of the most awakening sermons, as other women have done long ago.

The work of God goes on mightily here, both in conviction and conversion. This morning I have spoken with four or five who seem to have been set at liberty within this month. I believe, within five

weeks, six in one class have received remission of sins, and five in one band received a second blessing. Peace be with you all!

I am Your affectionate brother. (JW)<sup>6</sup>

The 1760s were years of considerable growth in Methodism. Along with this was a continued recognition of the extraordinary nature of the things that were taking place under God. I think it is reasonable to suggest that Wesley's theology was shaped, not simply by the doctrines of the Established Church, but also by experience. This, in turn, grew from his observation that this was consistent with the primitive church.

The second letter I cite was written to Mrs Crosby just over a decade later, in June 1771. This time Wesley was writing from Londonderry, Ireland. It will be noted that by this time Wesley was more open to considering Sarah's ministry as 'preaching' and that he associates her with lay preaching – even though he knew there was resistance to his position by others.

MY DEAR SISTER,

I THINK the strength of the cause rests there; on your having an extraordinary call. So I am persuaded has every one of our lay Preachers: Otherwise, I could not countenance his preaching at all. It is plain to me, that the whole work of God termed Methodism is an extraordinary dispensation of his providence. Therefore, I do not wonder if several things occur therein which do not fall under ordinary rules of discipline. St. Paul's ordinary rule was, 'I permit not a woman to speak in the congregation.' Yet, in extraordinary cases, he made a few exceptions; at Corinth in particular.

I am, my dear sister,  
Your affectionate brother. (JW)<sup>7</sup>

Space does not permit a more detailed account of the extraordinary evolution of the ministry of Lay Preacher within Methodism. It is useful, however, to note that this ministry went on to become a feature of Methodism both in Britain and its colonies. A further note, however, is necessary at this point. During the latter years of Wesley's life, it is fair to say, the role of women preachers,

particularly of some of the extraordinary women who emerged as leaders, was accepted. However, in the years following Wesley's death, this acceptance diminished considerably. This was particularly so in Wesleyan Methodism where the power struggles between the ordained preachers and the laity came to the fore. This was partly to do with the debate about Methodism's relationship with the Church of England. Some of the branches of Methodism that separated from Wesleyan Methodism, such as the Primitive Methodists, continue to have an emphasis on lay ministry, and retained the possibility for women to exercise this ministry. Other minor Methodist groups, such as the Bible Christians, took a similar stance.

Some close parallels can be drawn between the emergence of the role of women in the primitive church and its suppression by a dominant patriarchy in the period that followed, and that of Wesleyan Methodism. Under the extraordinary leadership of John Wesley women were allowed to exercise extraordinary roles. Under the dominant male leadership that followed, such leadership by women was largely suppressed. It was not until some time after Methodist union (1902 in Australasia and 1932 in Britain) that the leadership role of women again began to emerge and women were accepted as lay preachers. This, in large part, can be attributed to the influence of some of the minor Methodist groups who kept the issues alive. However, the leadership given by the founder of Methodism in these matters was never fully forgotten.

I conclude by sharing what I believe to be an inspiring story of the ministry of a Lay Preacher who commenced his lay ministry in Tasmania, and then came to Victoria to become the '*father of Methodism*' in that state.

William Witton was born in London in 1811 and by the time he was 19, in 1830, young William had migrated to Tasmania, settling in Launceston. Here this young Anglican came under the influence of the Wesleyan Methodists and, before long, became an accredited lay preacher under the guidance of both ministerial and lay preachers in that place. In 1835 Port Phillip was established as a settlement, and a movement of people from Launceston made its way across Bass Strait to establish the village of Melbourne.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Volume 12, p. 329.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, Volume 12, p. 332.

One of the early settlers in Melbourne was William Witton, who by this time was married with a young family. He was in his mid-twenties. However, he was held in such high regard that he was authorised by the District Chairman, the Rev Joseph Orton, to commence missionary work in Melbourne. He was appointed by Orton as the first Class Leader, and was the most regular lay preacher in Melbourne's earliest preaching places. The earliest Class meetings were held in the Witton home in Lonsdale Street.

A decade later, Melbourne had grown and the first minister had settled into his appointment. William Witton was sent to Portland Bay as a 'hired local preacher' to continue his ministry there – in conjunction with some business ventures. Discovering there was already a local preacher in the area, he moved to Belfast (Port Fairy) where he exercised a significant ministry. From there, in 1847, he ventured to the infant village of Warrnambool and commenced the first services of Christian worship in that place. Witton provided an overseeing role until the first ministers were appointed in the Western District. He remained for some years as a leading ('almost perpetual curate') in the region. In the 1870s he moved to Gippsland, where again he exercised an important pioneering ministry as a lay preacher. He prepared there for the first ordained ministers, and when they arrived, continued a very effective lay ministry in the region. He is credited with being the founder of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Warragul.

At the Jubilee celebrations of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Victorian in 1885 William Witton was rightly recognized as the 'Father of Methodism in Victoria'.